

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000742

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV US

SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: VP'S SON SOUNDS US OUT

Classified By: DCM STEPHEN G. MCFARLAND REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Jose Vicente Rangel Jr., mayor of Caracas' Sucre district and son of Venezuelan Vice President Rangel, met with DCM March 11 primarily to discuss bilateral relations. Rangel declined to support President Chavez' claims that the USG sought to kill him, but otherwise defended the GOV's record. He insisted that the USG was giving Chavez the ammunition to attack the US, and he concluded that the opposition was feeding the USG erroneous information about Venezuela. He asked at the end if there was a particular message for the GOV. DCM said the message was that the USG remained concerned about democracy, regional issues such as the Colombian guerrillas, and conflicting signals on oil; that the USG was convinced that the GOV had not responded positively to USG efforts to improve bilateral communication; that the relationship was getting steadily worse, and that the USG concluded that the GOV wanted it that way. Rangel listened carefully. He said that no bilateral issue should be excluded from conversation; he asked if the USG was going to signal some flexibility. DCM responded that the USG had sent its signals; the issue was if the GOV was going to respond, privately or publicly. Rangel said he would relay this message back to the GOV (including to his father). END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The conversation centered on USG-GOV relations. The DCM asked Rangel point blank if he really believed that the USG was trying to kill Chavez. Rangel, like the other two Chavista officials DCM met with this week, avoided saying yes. Instead, he excused the President's claim as a) a way of pressing the USG to crack down on anti-Chavez plotters in Miami, and b) tit for tat in response to senior USG criticism of Chavez. DCM noted that Chavez was doing more than this; every day brought forward a new false accusation. We had no problem with governments who disagreed with us or even criticized us, but false accusations indicated a lack of interest in a serious relationship.

¶3. (C) Rangel made several points: first, the USG's public statements were out of touch with reality, so much so that he had to believe that it was the opposition that was advising senior USG officials directly. Second, that the USG's direct criticism of Chavez both pushed him towards a more confrontational policy, and also boosted him outside Venezuela. Third, that the GOV's principal challenges laid within rather than outside Venezuela. Fourth, that the Embassy should try to have more contact with non-opposition elements. Rangel underscored Chavez' democratic electoral victories, his 60 approval rating, and his uncanny ability to connect with the poor (he observed, with a mix of admiration and chagrin, that while he as mayor got criticism for continued poverty, Chavez as President got none).

¶4. (C) The DCM countered that the GOV needed to understand that the USG had valid concerns about democracy and human rights; obviously our two governments disagreed on the subjects, but the USG would continue to express its opinion on them. In our opinion, we had not pushed Chavez towards confrontation; rather, he had chosen that path for his own reasons, domestic and international. Finally, we were interested in having contact with all sectors in Venezuela, but it was increasingly difficult to have contact with the GOV.

¶5. (C) Rangel asked if there was a special message for the GOV. The DCM said that it was:

a) the USG had serious concerns about Venezuelan democracy and human rights, regional issues including the Colombian guerrillas, and conflicting GOV statements about Venezuelan oil exports to the U.S.

b) that the USG had made an effort to improve communications with the GOV after the August 15, 2004 referendum, and the arrival of Amb. Brownfield. Our conclusion was that while some in the GOV, such as VP Rangel, appeared interested, the GOV's message to the USG was that it was not interested. The message was manifested in the reduced contact with Amb. Brownfield, as well as in such issues as opting out of the CNIES military/drug trafficking intel exchange system.

c) bilateral relations were bad and were getting worse.

d) in response to Rangel's query about a possible USG statement or action to clear the air now, DCM said that we had made our message clear; if the GOV wanted to give us a response, in private or in public, we would listen.

¶ 6. (C) Rangel said he understood the message and would pass it on.

¶ 7. (C) Comment: Another source told us that Vice President Rangel knew ahead of time about the meeting. Rangel Jr. will certainly pass the gist of the conversation on to his father. Rangel Jr. conveyed a sense of frustration that bilateral relations were in a downward spiral, and an interest in seeing some improvement. Ironically, he looks to the USG to do something about this, an attitude shared by Venezuela's opposition, as opposed to looking to the GOV to take a positive step. While he (and other Chavistas) do not agree with some of the specifics of Chavez' recent accusations, neither can they do much about them in terms of confronting Chavez.

Brownfield

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